Scotland and Northern Ireland council and National Health Service workers in growing pay battle

Steve James
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Tens of thousands of local authority workers in Scotland and Northern Ireland are striking, planning to strike or balloting against sub-inflation pay offers. The disputes are driven by soaring living costs.

Local authority workers are entering the fray simultaneously with the wildcat walkouts at the huge Grangemouth oil refinery in Scotland and elsewhere, and at Amazon depots across the UK as disputes involving hundreds of thousands of communication, health, education and transport workers break out.

In all some 250,000 workers are employed by Scottish councils. The pay claim submitted by the three trade unions in the Scottish Joint Council (SJC) Unite, Unison and the GMB, in January called for a flat rate £3,000 pay increase, a minimum of £12 an hour, based on the then RPI rate of inflation of 7.1 percent. This claim amounts to real terms pay cut, as RPI is now 11.8 percent with predictions of its reaching 17 percent by the end of 2022.

The employers, the Councils of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA) and the Scottish government, are offering a mere £9.98 an hour minimum, no flat rate increase and allowances to be increased by 2 percent. CoSLA said this was in line with a reduction of £251 million in core funding to local government from the Scottish National Party (SNP) government.

The SJC unions are doing everything in their power to prevent a united struggle emerging among council workers, at a time when millions throughout the UK face similar attacks. The union apparatus, deeply integrated into local authority management, seeks to limit workers to fragmented and delayed actions.

The SJC eventually balloted school, nursery and cleansing workers over strike action in June, months after initial negotiations.

On July 27, Unite finally announced that cleansing workers at 26 of 32 Scottish local authorities had voted for strike action. Workers at Tayside Contracts, which contracts work for Angus, Dundee City and Perth and Kinross, also voted to strike.

Unison reported that its members across Scotland had “overwhelmingly” rejected the employers' offer and that workers at nine authorities had voted in sufficient numbers to overcome the 50 percent turnout threshold imposed by the anti-strike laws. The GMB reported thousands of members supporting strikes, surpassing the 50 percent threshold in Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, and Glasgow cleansing departments, while schools in Aberdeen, Dundee, Glasgow and Renfrewshire.

Immediately after these ballot results, the SJC wrote in July 27 to CoSLA noting that they now had legal mandates to disrupt the operation of 1,200 schools across 16 local authorities and waste collection across 25 authorities.

Rather than act on votes expressing the determination of council workers to put up a fight, the unions have authorised only two strikes. The first, in Edinburgh, is due to commence August 18 and run for 12 days, to coincide with the latter half of the Edinburgh International and Fringe Festivals, and only 250 workers will be involved. Thereafter, some 1,500 bin workers at a further 15 councils are scheduled currently to strike for a week commencing August 24. According to Unite, “Action specifically impacting schools is expected to begin in early September”.

By dragging everything out, the SJC will seize the any shift in position from CoSLA to justify attempting to call off any further action.

Simultaneous with the council workers ballots, 150,000 National Health Service (NHS) workers in Scotland were balloting until August 8 on an NHS Scotland pay offer of 5 percent and a minimum wage of £10.50. Although the “offer” is vastly below inflation, the unions, well aware that that the offer would be thrown out ensured the ballot was merely “consultative”, meaning that another vote would be required before any action took place. On Friday the votes were published showing significant majorities for industrial
Workers at Derry City and Strabane District Council were set to strike for four weeks, starting July 18. Unite members working in cleansing and council venues were demanding a 10 percent increase. But Unite regional official, Gareth Scott conceded that even this sub inflation demand was “up for negotiation”. Then, on July 15 the strike was called off “as a matter of good faith” after the district council announced “positive and constructive negotiations” with both NIPSA union members and Unite. Days later, Unite advised its intention to ballot members recommending acceptance of a deal reported in the media as including an offer of as little as a 2.5 percent wage increase, although a one off £1,000 payment had previously been floated.

One thousand workers at Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon District Council have announced they intend to strike from August 15 and “strike action and action short of strike would take place over four weeks.” The members of GMB, NIPSA and Unite, who represent 80 percent of the council workforce, are opposing unequal pay rates and seeking redress for the cost-of-living crisis. Strike action has already been called off once.

Belfast City Council is the largest council, employing 2,500 workers. One thousand of these are members of Unite, SIPTU, NIPSA and the GMB and are opposed to the 1.7 percent offer. Yet again the unions are doing everything to demobilise this sentiment. A “union source” told the Belfast Telegraph that negotiations were continuing, and that strike action was merely “being considered”.

The sabotage of their fight poses workers in Scotland, Northern Ireland and throughout Britain with the organisation of their struggle out of the hands of the trade union apparatus.

Not a single step forward can be made within the framework and under the domination of the unions. New organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees that act independently of the trade unions and seek the broadest unity in the working class in the struggle against the capitalist onslaught, are required in every workplace and community.

Workers should contact International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-file Committees (IWA-RFC), and join an international network of worker-controlled, democratic organisations based on unifying their fight workers globally based on a socialist programme.